

Living Our Faith
Presented by Rev. Margie King Saphier on October 19, 2003
United First Parish Church, Quincy, MA

A few years ago I was visiting my sister and her friend, a Protestant minister. While we were together, he spoke frankly about his struggles with Christian doctrines and creeds to which his denomination subscribed. He looked at me almost wistfully, saying, "You don't have this struggle You can believe anything." This assessment surprised me. I responded, "It is true as a Unitarian Universalist I do not struggle with doctrines and creeds; instead I wrestle with the responsibility of freedom of belief and being true in my actions to that belief."

I often think back to that conversation. Like many of us, Unitarian Universalism is my Chosen Faith. I was raised in the Episcopal Church. By the time I was in high school, I, like my sister's friend, was questioning if I could say the Nicene Creed, the general confession and other parts of the service and remain true to myself. There was a period in my life when I did not attend church. Then when my husband and I had children, I began looking. Twenty-one years ago I attended my first Unitarian Universalist service, and I knew I had found my spiritual home – a faith community.

As I think back to that conversation, I realize that my friend was struggling with beliefs that claimed to be reality, whereas my answer reflected the struggle of faith. There is an important distinction between faith and belief. Faith, in contrast to belief, is not a definition of reality, nor a received answer. Instead it is an active, open state that makes us willing to explore. In a faith community we need to bring essential questioning to any belief system we may hold. Sharon Salzberg, Buddhist teacher, lists some of the essential questions: Can it (the belief system) transform our minds? Can it help reshape our pain into wisdom and love? When we grapple with the truth of our experience in relationship to our beliefs, we have the chance to deepen our faith. So the next question is: does our experience match the belief system? If the answer is no, we can let the belief go. If the answer is yes, we can trust it as our own.

Every religion, including Unitarian Universalism has its beliefs. Beliefs can serve as a reminder of what we value. It is not the existence of beliefs that is the problem. The problem is what happens to us when we hold them rigidly, without examining them. Brother David Stendl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, as well as a practitioner of Zen Buddhism, has been involved in the dialogue between Eastern and Western spirituality. He says, "In genuine faith **we hold our beliefs firmly but lightly**. We believe in God, not in a particular understanding of God. That is why people of faith are of one heart, even though their beliefs may differ widely." We, Unitarian Universalist, go even further to say that our understanding of a greater reality may or may not include the existence of God but we are still of one heart thereby creating a community of faith.

Recently I was talking with Richard Gilbert, retired UU minister and author of this morning's opening words. We were discussing the history of the concepts of unitarianism and universalism and how these two long-held beliefs had a way of re-emerging throughout Christian History even though they were declared heretical. Gilbert shared a story that illustrated this point all too well. Back in the 1960's Pope John XXIII was holding an interfaith gathering. When Rev. Dana Greely, who was president of the newly formed UUA, was introduced to the Pope, the Pope responded, "O yes, you belong to the group who took our heresies and made them into a religion." Although the Pope meant this to be humorous, I strongly suggest that the concepts of unitarianism and universalism were present long before the Roman Catholic Church declared them to be heretical. The primary belief of Judaism was and is one God. Right from the beginning of Christianity, there were Christian Jews, who believed the teachings of Jesus but did not believe Jesus to be divine, to be God. The question of the unity of God appears throughout Christian Church History to the present. According to Elaine Pagels this is evident in the question many Christians ask each other, "Which Jesus do you believe in: the Risen Christ or Jesus, the man?"

Origen, a Christian leader in the early 200's, may have been the first universalist. If he wasn't the first, he was the first Christian to write about it. In many ways he was before his times. He believed that many of the stories in the Bible were allegorical. He also

believed in universal salvation. In 325, the Nicene creed was written to eliminate many differing beliefs –the two primary ones were unitarianism and universalism, thereby making them heretical to the teaching of the church.

Unitarian Universalist history is an on-going or living tradition of **holding our faith firmly but our beliefs lightly**. During the Reformation, Francis David became the Father of Unitarianism. His life is an example of holding his faith firmly but beliefs lightly. David’s faith in the on-going quest for religious truth was firm. But because he believed that religious truth needed to be questioned, he held that perceived truth lightly. David did not see the Reformation as a one-time event. He saw it as a process: one was always in the process of reforming or becoming formed again. As David pursued religious truth, he left the Roman Catholic Church to explore Lutheranism. His continued explorations led him to Calvinism. Finally his quest led him to the belief in the unity of God, or Unitarianism. His faith in the on-going pursuit for truth was done in a spirit of generosity. David is remembered for his words, “We need not think alike to love alike.” Ultimately David died in prison because he held his faith firmly: he continued to seek “his vision of religious truth” and to share it with others.

This historical church has a rich legacy of valuing freedom in the search of truth, but like David, this freedom came with consequences. Although Rev. John Wainwright, the first minister of this church, was popular with many of the parishioners; he was banished by John Winthrop of Boston because of his liberal preaching. One year later his sister-in-law, Anne Hutchinson, was also banished for her beliefs.

In reading the history of this church, I learned that by 1750 this church was Unitarian in its beliefs and preaching. To put that in perspective of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing preached in 1818 his sermon “Unitarian Christianity,” in which he defined our movement at that time. The American Unitarian Association was founded in 1825.

When people live their faith, they often cause a reaction. In Pali, the language of the original Buddhist texts, the word *saddha* is translated as faith, confidence or trust. Sharon Salzberg explains in her book titled Faith that *saddha* literally means, “to place the heart upon.” She says, “Faith is the capacity of the heart that allows us to draw close to the present and find there the underlying thread connecting the moment’s experience to the fabric of all of life.” In Pali the word for faith is a verb. Faith is not a singular state we have, but is something that we do. When we faithe, we move into the unknown, openly meeting whatever the next moment brings. When we faithe, “we hold out our Chalice of being to be filled with the graces of life.”

In Latin and Hebrew the word for faith is also a verb. The Hebrew term Yahweh, the name God claimed in the book of Exodus as to who God is, is derived from the verb “to be” and is believed by Biblical scholars to be best translated as “I am who I am,” as well as, “I will be who I will be.” When we faithe, we too, are “I am who I am,” as well as, “I will be who I will be.” Faith is the total body orientation of an individual. Faith as a verb is “walking your talk.”

Both John Adams and John Quincy Adams put their faith in action. As Leo told us this morning John Adams’ faith was based on conscience and common sense and the Biblical teaching “to love God and one’s neighbor.” John Quincy also held these two tenets as the foundation of his faith, but he also seriously entertained the possibility of the trinity – much to the dismay of Abigail and John. John Quincy went to church twice each Sunday: here and Congregational Churches in the area. The religious differences between John Quincy and his parents were matters of beliefs; not matters of faith. The list is too long as to how these two men faithed or brought their faith to action; but two examples are when John Adams defended the British officers who were charged with murder in the Boston Massacre; the other is when John Quincy Adams defended the slaves on the Amistad. Like the Dali Lama in this morning’s reading, both father and son in their life’s work understood the indispensable qualities of compassion and peace of mind.

It takes courage to have trust, compassion, to faith. The opposite of faith is not doubt. Faith dries up without doubt. It is in our doubts that we find cause us to ask our deepest questions. The very act of questioning can lead to a deepening of faith. The opposite of faith is distrust or fear. We often fear what we cannot control. When fear dominates, our sense of possibility collapses. Fear prevents us from seeing the needs or plight of another. Last night many of us saw the movie "Bowling for Columbine." Michael Moore showed that the reason so many people in this country are shot and killed by handguns, is that fear has come to dominate our lives. There are other countries, such as Canada, who have more guns per capita, and whose population see just as many violent TV programs and movies, and yet they have no where near the shootings the United States has. They have less fear.

Historically fear has inspired the United States to commit acts that are contrary to democratic values. During WWII, out of fear, we incarcerated hundreds of thousands of innocent Japanese Americans. During the Cold War the United States, out of fear of communism, the U.S. government removed rulers, (some of whom were democratically elected) from power through CIA initiatives in Guatemala, Chile, Iran. We then supported dictators, who pledged their support to the U.S. as long the U.S. supported them. Because of the present day fear of terrorism, our government is not only curtailing its citizens' civil liberties, but also has indefinitely incarcerated over 600 men at Guantanamo. These men have had no charges lodged against them; they have had no trial, which means these men can languish in prison indefinitely.

In contrast to fear, "Faith enables us, **despite our fear**, to get as close as possible to the truth of the present moment, so we can offer our hearts fully to it, with integrity. **Faith gives us a willingness to engage life, which means the unknown, and not shrink from it."**

There are many people who do not understand this type of faith. In response to a favorable article in the Globe about Unitarian Universalism during General Assembly, which was held in Boston last June, there was an irate letter to the editor questioning the religiosity of Unitarian Universalists when the existence of God is not required to be

central to our faith. Because of this perceived error, this writer deduced that this lack explained the lack of morals, such as the acceptance of Gays and Lesbians, liberal religious education, including sex ed, etc. This is not the first time Unitarian Universalists have been attacked for living their faith.

Back in March, 1999, Mr. J. Edward Pawlick sent a letter to all the residents of Wellesley and Wayland in which he attacked Unitarian Universalists in regards to our religious traditions of affirming the inherent dignity of ALL people (especially Gays and Lesbians), of being inclusive in our ministry so that 50% of ministers were women, of providing our children a liberal education regarding sex and sexuality, and of welcoming humanists into our congregations. Unitarian Universalist have a history of defending those who were deemed by society or the government as “The Other.” In last week’s sermon, Rev. Hank Pierce explained that the word “hospitality” is really a word of action in which we welcome the stranger. When an individual or group of people are designated as “Other,” they become strangers to us. Living our faith requires that we reach out to the stranger. I have quoted these lines from poet Edwin Markham before, and I will probably quote them again. He wrote these words after visiting a Universalist Church when he was no longer welcomed at his own church

He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout,
But love and I had the wit to win.
We drew a circle and drew him in.

Historically we have expanded our circle, as others were shrinking theirs. Listen to the words of Rev. John H. Nichols, the former minister of the Wellesley Hills UUSociety, when he responded to Pawlick’s assertions, explaining how living one’s faith often invites strong responses – even attacks. Nichols stressed and I quote, “UU congregations were attacked when they sheltered abolitionists who said the slave trade was wrong, and our congregations were attacked when they called the first women to be ministers of their congregations. Our congregations in the South were attacked when they supported the freedom movement. Our congregations were attacked in the North and on the West coast during the McCarthy period, when they supported the right of political liberals to defend themselves. They were attacked when

they raised questions about the wisdom of the Viet Nam war. They have been attacked all over the country for their support of the right of Gay and Lesbian people to live with dignity in peace and freedom. If you believe in something that is important – you are likely to be attacked by those whom you threaten. And now we know that.”

Yes, It takes courage to live one’s faith. I believe we are doing just that here at United First Parish Church. I hope that those of you who are visiting for the first time will join us for coffee hour and learn about the various social justice initiatives we are actively supporting: from working with GBIO for low income housing, to conducting a writing initiative to send postcards to your state legislator regarding the pending House Bill 3190, otherwise known as the Anti-gay Bill, to addressing the government’s increasing infringement of civil liberties of US citizens and non-citizens., to the need for prison reform. Come and learn how we support one another as we covenant to unite to lift our hearts and open our minds to a larger reality as we accept, support and encourage one another. Being a community of faith does not preclude having fun. We invite everyone to join us at The Stone Temple Coffee House this Friday and enjoy an evening with Les Sampou.

Yes, we are a community of faith as “Each morning we hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and to give back.” As we do so may our hearts draw close to the present and find there the underlying thread connecting the moment’s experience to the fabric of all life. May it be so.